Extract from **Internationale Situationniste** at **Context XXI**

(http://contextxxi.org/our-goals-and-methods-in-the.html)

extracted on: 15 November 2026
Date of this contribution: October 1967

Our Goals and Methods in the Strasbourg Scandal

n KEN KNABB (TRANSLATION) ■ SITUATIONISTISCHE INTERNATIONALE

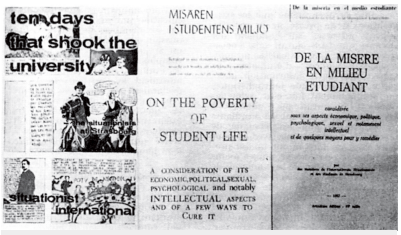
The various expressions of shock and outrage in response to the situationist pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life,* which was published at the expense of the Strasbourg chapter of the French National Student Union [UNEF], although having the salutary effect of causing the theses in the pamphlet itself to be rather widely read, have inevitably given rise to numerous misconceptions in the reportage and commentary on the SI's role in the affair. In response to all kinds of illusions fostered by the press, by university officials and even by a certain number of unthinking students, we are now going to specify exactly what the conditions of our intervention were and explain the goals we were pursuing with the methods that we considered consistent with them.

Even more erroneous than the exaggerations of the press or of certain opposing lawyers concerning the amount of money the SI supposedly took the opportunity of pillaging from the treasury of the pitiful student union is the absurd notion, often expressed in the newspaper accounts, according to which the SI sunk so low as to campaign among the Strasbourg students in order to persuade them of the validity of our perspectives and to get a student government elected on such a program. We neither did this nor attempted the slightest infiltration of the UNEF by secretly slipping SI partisans into it. Anyone who has ever bothered to read us is aware that we have no interest in such goals and do not use such methods. What actually happened is that a few Strasbourg students came to us in the summer of 1966 and informed us that six of their friends — and not they themselves — had just been elected as officers of the Bureau of the local Student Association (AFGES), although they had no program whatsoever and were widely known in the UNEF as extremists who were in complete disagreement with all the factions of that decomposing body, and who were even determined to destroy it. The fact that they were elected (quite legally) was a glaring demonstration of the total apathy of the mass of students and of the total impotence of the Association's remaining bureaucrats. These latter no doubt figured that the "extremist" Bureau would be incapable of finding any adequate way to implement its negative intentions. Conversely, this was the fear of the students who had sought us out; and it was mainly for this reason that they themselves had declined to take part in this "Bureau": for only a coup of some scope, and not some merely humorous exploitation of their position, could save its members from the air of compromise that such a pitiful role immediately entails. To add to the complexity of the problem, while the students we were meeting with were familiar with the SI's positions and declared themselves in general agreement with them, those who were in the Bureau were for the most part ignorant of them, and counted mainly on those we were seeing to figure out what action would best correspond to their subversive intentions.

At this stage we limited ourselves to suggesting that all of them write and publish a general critique of the student movement and of the society as a whole, such a project having at least the advantage of forcing them to clarify in common what was still unclear to them. In addition, we stressed that their legal access to money and credit was the most useful aspect of the ridiculous authority that had so imprudently been allowed to them, and that a nonconformist use of these resources would have the advantage of shocking many people and thus drawing attention to the nonconformist aspects of the content of their text. These comrades agreed with our recommendations. In the development of this project they remained in contact with the SI, particularly through the SI's delegate, Mustapha Khayati.

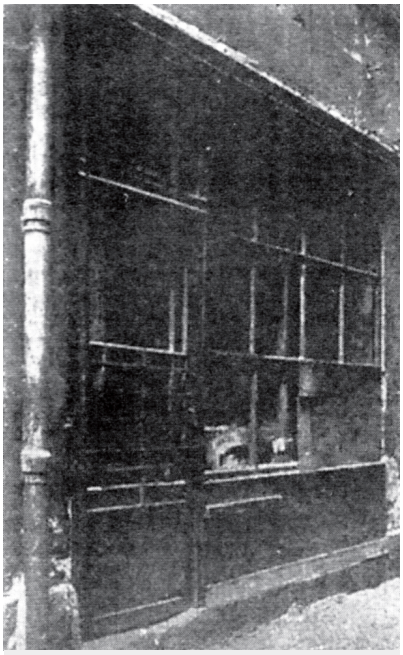
The discussion and the first drafts undertaken collectively by those we had met with and the members of the AFGES Bureau — all of whom had resolved to see the matter through — brought about an important modification of the plan. Everyone was in agreement about the basic critique to be made and the main points that Khayati had suggested, but they found they were incapable of effecting a satisfactory formulation, especially in the short time remaining before the beginning of the term. This inability should

not be seen as the result of any serious lack of talent or experience, but was simply the consequence of the extreme *diversity* of the group, both within and outside the Bureau. Having originally come together on a very vague basis, they were poorly prepared to collectively articulate a theory they had not really appropriated together. In addition, personal antagonisms and mistrust arose among them as the project progressed. The only thing that still held them together was the shared concern that the coup attain the most far-reaching and incisive effect. As a result, Khayati ended up drafting the greater part of the text, which was periodically discussed and approved among the group of students at Strasbourg and by the situationists in Paris — the only (relatively few) significant additions being made by the latter.



Éditions en Angleterre, Suède, Amérique, Espagne et France (1967)

Various preliminary actions announced the appearance of the pamphlet. On October 26 the cybernetician Moles (see *Internationale Situationniste* #9, page 44 *[Correspondence with a Cybernetician]),* having finally attained a professorial chair in social psychology in order to devote himself to the programming of young functionaries, was driven from it during the opening minutes of his inaugural lecture by tomatoes hurled at him by a dozen students. (Moles was subsequently given the same treatment in March at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where this certified robot was to lecture on urbanistic methods for controlling the masses — this latter refutation being carried out by two or three dozen young anarchists belonging to groups that want to bring revolutionary criticism to bear on all modern issues.) Shortly after this inaugural class — which was at least as unprecedented in the annals of the university as Moles himself — the AFGES began publicizing the pamphlet by pasting up André Bertrand's comic strip "The Return of the Durruti Column," a document that had the merit of stating in no uncertain terms what his comrades were planning on doing with their positions: "The general crisis of the old union apparatuses and leftist bureaucracies was felt everywhere, especially among the students, where activism had for a long time had no other outlet than the most sordid devotion to stale ideologies and the most unrealistic ambitions. The last squad of professionals who elected our heroes didn't even have the excuse that they had been misled. They placed their hopes for a new lease on life in a group that didn't hide its intentions of scuttling this archaic militantism once and for all."



Lieu de rencontre supposé des internationaux-situationnistes à Paris

> De tels mouvements révolutionnaires se distinguent des autres par le caractère illimité de leurs buts et de leurs promesses ... Quelle que soit leur histoire individuelle, ils constituaient collectivement une couche sociale distincte, une *intelligentsia* frustrée et de second ordre ... Alors se constituait un groupe d'une espèce particulière ... impitoyable et en constante fermentation, obsédé par des chimères apocalyptiques et pénétré de sa propre infaillibilité ; ce groupe se sentait très loin au-dessus du reste de l'humanité et repoussait toute prétention autre que celle inhérente à sa prétendue mission ... Des promesses millénaires et illimitées exprimées avec une conviction illimitée et prophétique devant un certain nombre d'hommes déracinés et désespérés dans le cadre d'une société dont les normes et les liens traditionnels sont en voie de désintégration, telle est, semble-t-il, l'origine de ce fanatisme souterrain ...
>
> Norman Cohn
> Les Fanatiques de l'Apocalypse.

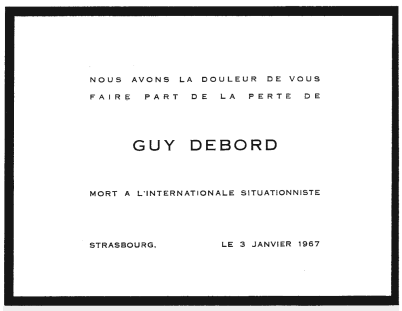
The pamphlet was distributed point-blank to the notables at the official opening ceremony of the university. Simultaneously, the AFGES Bureau announced that its only "student" program was the immediate dissolution of that Association, and convoked a special general assembly to vote on that question. This prospect immediately horrified many people. "This may be the first concrete manifestation of a revolt aiming quite openly at the destruction of society," wrote a local newspaper *(Dernières Nouvelles,* 4 December 1966). *L'Aurore* (November 26) referred to "the Situationist International, an organization with a handful of members in the chief capitals of Europe — anarchists playing at revolution, who talk of 'seizing power,' not in order to keep it, but in order to sow disorder and destroy even their own authority." And even in Turin the *Gazetta del Popolo* of the same date expressed excessive concern: "It must be considered, however, whether repressive measures ... may risk provoking disturbances. ... In Paris and other university cities in France the Situationist International, galvanized by the triumph of its adherents in Strasbourg, is preparing a major offensive to take control of the student organizations." At this point we had to take into consideration a new decisive factor: the situationists had to defend themselves from being *coopted* as a mere "news item" or intellectual fad. The pamphlet had ended up being transformed into an SI text: we had not felt that we could refuse to help these comrades in their desire to strike a blow against the system, and it was unfortunately *not possible for this help to have been less than it was.* This involvement of the SI gave us, for the du-

vation of the project, a position as *de facto* leaders which we in no case wanted to prolong beyond this limited joint action: as anyone can well imagine, the pitiful *student milieu* is of no interest to us. Here as in other situations, we had simply tried to act in such a way as to make the new social critique that is presently taking shape reappear by means of the practice without concessions that is its exclusive basis. The unorganized character of the group of Strasbourg students had prevented the carrying out of an orderly dialogue, which alone could have ensured a minimal equality in decisionmaking, and had thus made necessary our direct intervention. The debate that normally characterizes a joint action undertaken by independent groups had scarcely any reality in this agglomeration of individuals, who showed more and more that they were united in their approval of the SI and separated in every other regard.

It goes without saying that such a deficiency in no way constituted for us a recommendation for this group of students as a whole, who seemed more or less interested in joining the SI as a sort of easy way of avoiding having to express themselves autonomously. Their lack of homogeneity was also revealed, to a degree we had not been able to foresee, on an unexpected issue: at the last minute several of them got cold feet at the idea of aggressively distributing the pamphlet at the university's opening ceremony. Khayati had to explain to these people that one must not try to make scandals half way; that it is absurd to commit yourself to such a coup and then hope to reduce the risk by toning down its repercussions; that on the contrary, the success of a scandal is the only relative safeguard for those who have deliberately triggered it. Even more unacceptable than this last-minute hesitation on such a elementary tactical point was the possibility that some of these individuals, who had so little confidence even in each other, might at some point come to make statements in our name. Khayati was thus charged by the SI to have the AFGES Bureau declare that none of them was a situationist. This they did in their communiqué of November 29: "None of the members of our Bureau belongs to the Situationist International, a movement which for some time has published a journal of the same name, but we declare ourselves in complete solidarity with its analyses and perspectives." On the basis of this declared *autonomy,* the SI then addressed a letter to André Schneider, president of the AFGES, and Vayr-Piova, vice-president, to affirm its total solidarity with what they had done. The SI's solidarity with them has been maintained ever since, both by our refusal to dialogue with those who tried to approach us while manifesting a certain envious hostility toward the Bureau members (some even having the stupidity to denounce their action to the SI as being "spectacular"!) and by our financial assistance and public support during the subsequent repression (see the declaration signed by 79 Strasbourg students at the beginning of April in solidarity with Vayr-Piova, who had been expelled from the university; a penalty that was rescinded a few months later). Schneider and Vayr-Piova stood firm in the face of penalties and threats; this firmness, however, was not maintained to the same degree in their attitude toward the SI.

The judicial repression immediately initiated in Strasbourg — and which has been followed by a series of proceedings in the same vein that are still going on — concentrated on the supposed illegality of the AFGES Bureau, which was, upon the publication of the situationist pamphlet, suddenly considered to be a mere "de facto Bureau" that was usurping the union representation of the students. This repression was all the more necessary since the holy alliance of bourgeois, Stalinists and priests against the AFGES had even less support among the city's 18,000 students than did the Bureau. It began with the court order of December 13, which sequestered the Association's offices and administration and prohibited the general assembly that the Bureau had convoked for the 16th for the purpose of voting on the dissolution of the AFGES. This ruling (resulting from the mistaken belief that a majority of the students were likely to support the Bureau's position if they had the opportunity to vote on it), by freezing the development of events, meant that our comrades — whose only goal was to destroy their own position of leadership without delay — were obliged to continue their resistance until the end of January. The Bureau's best practice until then had been their treatment of the mob of reporters who were flocking to get interviews: they refused most of them and insultingly boycotted those who represented the worst institutions (French Television, *Planète),* thereby pressuring one segment of the press into giving a more exact account of the scandal and into reproducing the AFGES communiqués less inaccurately. Since the fight was now taking place on the terrain of administrative measures and since the legal AFGES Bureau was still in control of the local section of the National Student Mutual, the Bureau struck back by deciding on January 11, and by implementing this decision the next day, to close the "University Psychological Aid Center" (BAPU), which depended financially on the Mutual, "considering that the BAPUs are the manifestation in the student milieu of repressive psychiatry's parapolice control, whose obvious function is to maintain ... the passivity of all exploited sectors, ... considering that the existence of a BAPU in Strasbourg is a disgrace and a threat to all the students of this university who are determined to think freely." At the national level, the UNEF was forced by the revolt of its Strasbourg chapter — which had previously been held up as a model — to recognize its own general bankruptcy. Although it obviously did not go so far as to defend the old illusions of unionist liberty that were so blatantly denied its opponents by the authorities, the UNEF nevertheless could not accept the judicial expulsion of the Strasbourg Bureau. A Strasbourg delegation was thus present at the general assembly of the UNEF held in Paris on January 14, and at the opening of the meeting demanded a preliminary vote on its motion to *dissolve the entire UNEF,* "considering that the UNEF declared itself a union uniting the vanguard of youth (Charter of Grenoble, 1946) at a time when labor unionism had long since been defeated and turned into a tool for the self-regulation of modern capitalism, working to integrate the

working class into the commodity system, … considering that the vanguardist pretension of the UNEF is constantly belied by its subreformist slogans and practice, … considering that student unionism is a pure and simple farce and that it is urgent to put an end to it." The motion concluded by calling on "all revolutionary students of the world … to join all the exploited people of their countries in undertaking a relentless struggle against all aspects of the old world, with the aim of contributing toward the international power of workers councils." Only two delegations, that of Nantes and that of the convalescent-home students, voted with Strasbourg to deal with this preliminary motion before hearing the report of the national leadership. (It should be noted, however, that in the preceding weeks the young UNEF bureaucrats had succeeded in deposing two other bureaus that had been spontaneously in favor of the AFGES position, those of Bordeaux and Clermont-Ferrand.) The Strasbourg delegation consequently walked out on a debate where it had nothing more to say.


NOUS AVONS LA DOULEUR DE VOUS
FAIRE PART DE LA PERTE DE

GUY DEBORD

MORT A L'INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE

STRASBOURG. LE 3 JANVIER 1967

Les grands espérances

Exemple de propagande anti-I.S., distribuée par des anonymes à l'assemblée générale de l'U.N.E.F. en janvier. Emanant de milieux sans relation avec la fraction secrète garnautine découverte un peu plus tard, la fausse nouvelle est encore employée ici avec quelque détachement, non tout à fait dénué d'un certain humour éculé.

The final exit of the AFGES Bureau was not to be so noble, however. Around this same time three situationists [the "Garnautins"] were excluded from the SI for having jointly perpetrated — and been forced to admit before the SI — several slanderous lies directed against Khayati, whom they had hoped would himself be excluded as a result of this clever scheme (see the January 22 tract "Warning! Three Provocateurs"). Their exclusion had no connection with the Strasbourg scandal — in it as in everything else they had ostensibly agreed with the conclusions reached in SI discussions — but two of them happened to be from the Strasbourg region. In addition, as we mentioned above, some of the Strasbourg students had begun to be irritated by the fact that the SI had not rewarded them for their shortcomings by *recruiting* them. The excluded liars sought out an uncritical audience among them and counted on covering up their previous lies and their admission of them by piling new lies on top of them. Thus all those who had been *rejected* by the SI joined forces in the mystical pretension of "going beyond" the practice that had condemned them. They began to believe the newspapers, and even to expand on them. They saw themselves as masses who had actually "seized power" in a sort of Strasbourg Commune. They told themselves that they hadn't been treated the way a revolutionary proletariat deserves to be treated, and that their historic action had superseded all previous theories. Forgetting that their only discernable "action" in this affair was to have made a few meager contributions to *the drafting of a text,* they collectively compensated for this deficiency by inflating their illusions. This amounted to nothing more ambitious than collectively fantasizing for a few weeks while continually upping the dose of constantly reiterated falsifications. The dozen Strasbourg students who had effectively supported the scandal split into two equal parts. This supplementary problem thus acted as a *touchstone.* We naturally made no *promises* to those who remained "partisans of the SI" and we clearly stated that we would not make any: it was simply up to them to be, unconditionally, partisans of the truth. Vayr-Piova and some of the others became partisans of falsehood with the excluded "Garnautins" (although certainly without knowledge of several excessive blunders in Frey's and Garnault's recent fabrications, but nevertheless being aware of quite a few of them). André Schneider, whose support the liars hoped to obtain since he held the title of AFGES president, was overwhelmed with false tales from all of them, and was weak enough to believe them without further investigation and to countersign one of their declarations. But after only a few days, independently becoming aware of a number of undeniable lies that these people thought it natural to tell their initiates in order to protect their miserable cause, Schneider immediately decided that he should publicly acknowledge his mistake: in his tract "Memories from the House of the Dead" he denounced those who had deceived him and led him to share the responsibility for a false accusation against the SI. The return of Schneider, whose character the liars had underestimated and who had thus been privileged to witness the full extent of their collective manipulation of embarrassing facts, struck a definitive blow in Strasbourg itself against the excluded and their accomplices, who had already been discredited everywhere else. In their spite these wretches, who the week before had gone to so much trouble to win over Schneider in order to add to the credibility of their venture, proclaimed him a notoriously feeble-minded person who had simply succumbed to "the prestige of the SI." (More and more often, recently, in the most diverse situations, liars end up in this way unwittingly identifying "the prestige of the SI" with *the simple fact of telling the truth* — a connection that certainly does us honor.) Before three months had gone by, the association of Frey and consorts with Vayr-Piova and all those who were willing to maintain a keenly solicited adhesion (at one time there were as many as eight or nine of them) was to reveal its sad reality: based on infantile lies by individuals who considered each other to be clumsy liars, it was the very picture, involuntarily parodic, of a type of "collective action" that should never be engaged in; and with the type of people who should never be associated with! They went so far as to conduct a ludicrous *electoral campaign* before the students of Strasbourg. Dozens of pages of pedantic scraps of misremembered situationist ideas and phrases were, with a total unawareness of the absurdity,

xxi

turned out with the sole aim of *holding on to the "power" of the Strasbourg chapter of the MNEF,* the minibureaucratic fiefdom of Vayr-Piova, who was eligible for reelection April 13. As successful in this venture as in their previous maneuvers, they were defeated by people as stupid as they were — the Stalinists and Christians, who were more naturally deft at electoral politics, and who also enjoyed the bonus of being able to denounce their deplorable rivals as "fake situationists." In the tract "The SI Told You So," put out the next day, André Schneider and his comrades were easily able to show how this unsuccessful attempt to exploit the *leftovers* of the scandal of five months before for promotional purposes revealed itself as the complete renunciation of the spirit and the declared perspectives of that scandal. Finally Vayr-Piova, in a communiqué distributed April 20, stated: "I find it amusing to be at last denounced as a 'nonsituationist' — something I have openly proclaimed ever since the SI set itself up as an official power." This is a representative sample of a vast and already forgotten literature. That the SI has become *an official power* — this is one of the typical theses of Vayr-Piova or Frey, which can be examined by those who are interested in the question; and after doing so they will know what to think of the intelligence of such theoreticians. But this aside, the fact that Vayr-Piova proclaims (whether "openly," or even "secretly," in a "proclamation" reserved for the most discreet accomplices in his lies) that he has not belonged to the SI since whenever was the date of our transformation into an "official power" — this is a *boldfaced lie.* Everyone who knows him knows that Vayr-Piova has *never* had the opportunity to claim to be anything but a "nonsituationist" (see what we wrote above concerning the AFGES communiqué of November 29).

The most favorable results of this whole affair naturally go beyond this new and opportunely much-publicized example of our refusal to enlist anything that a neomilitantism in search of glorious subordination might throw our way. No less negligible is the fact that the scandal forced the official recognition of the irreparable decomposition of the UNEF, a decomposition that was even more advanced than its pitiful appearance suggested: the *coup de grace* was still echoing in July at its 56th Congress in Lyon, in the course of which the sad president Vandenburie had to confess: "The unity of the UNEF has long since ended. Each association lives *(SI note: this term is pretentiously inaccurate)* autonomously, without paying any attention to the directives of the National Committee. The growing gap between the rank and file and the governing bodies has reached a state of serious degradation. The history of the proceedings of the UNEF has become nothing but a series of crises. ... Reorganization and a revival of action have not proved possible." Equally comical were some side-effects stirred up among the academics, who felt that this was another current issue to petition about. As can be well imagined, we considered the position published by the forty professors and assistants of the Faculty of Arts at Strasbourg, which denounced the *fake students* behind this "tempest in a teacup" about false problems "without the shadow of a solution," to be more logical and socially rational (as was, for that matter, Judge Llabador's summing up) than that wheedling attempt at approval circulated in February by a few decrepit modernist-institutionalists gnawing their meager bones at the professorial chairs of "Social Sciences" at Nanterre (impudent Touraine, loyal Lefebvre, Maoist Baudrillart, cunning Lourau).

In fact, we want ideas to become *dangerous* again. We cannot be accepted with the spinelessness of a false eclectic interest, as if we were Sartres, Althussers, Aragons or Godards. Let us note the wise words of a certain Professor Lhuillier, reported in the *Nouvel Observateur* (21 December 1966): "I am for freedom of thought. But if there are any Situationists in the room, I want them to get out right now." While not entirely denying the effect that the dissemination of a few basic truths may have had in slightly accelerating the movement that is impelling the lagging French youth toward an awareness of an impending more general crisis in the society, we think that the distribution of *On the Poverty of Student Life* has been a much more significant factor of clarification in some other countries where such a process is already much more clearly under way. In the afterword of their edition of Khayati's text, the English situationists wrote: "The most highly developed critique of modern life has been made in one of the least highly developed modern countries — in a country which has not yet reached the point where the complete disintegration of all values becomes patently obvious and engenders the corresponding forces of radical rejection. In the French context, situationist theory has anticipated the social forces by which it will be realized." The theses of *On the Poverty of Student Life* have been much more truly understood in the United States and in England (the strike at the London School of Economics in March caused a certain stir, the *Times* commentator unhappily seeing in it a return of the class struggle he had thought was over with). To a lesser degree this is also the case in the Netherlands — where the SI's critique, reinforcing a much harsher critique by events themselves, was not without effect on the recent dissolution of the "Provo" movement — and in the Scandinavian countries. The struggles of the West Berlin students this year have also picked up on some aspects of the critique, though in a still very confused way.

But revolutionary youth has no alternative but to join with the mass of workers who, starting from their experience of the new conditions of exploitation, are going to take up once again the struggle to control their world and to do away with work. When young people begin to know the current theoretical form of this real movement that is everywhere spontaneously bursting forth from the soil of modern society, this is only a *moment* of the progression by which this unified theoretical critique (inseparable from an adequate *practical unification)* strives to break the silence and the general organization of separation. It is only in this sense that we find the result satisfactory. In speaking of revolutionary youth, we are obviously not referring to that alienated and semiprivileged fraction molded by the university — a

sector that is the natural base for an admiring consumption of a fantasized situationist theory considered as the latest spectacular fashion. We will continue to disappoint and refute that kind of approbation. Sooner or later it will be understood that the SI must be judged not on the superficially scandalous aspects of certain manifestations through which it appears, but on its *essentially scandalous* central truth.

Situationist International: Situationistisch / Situationist: All das, was sich auf die Theorie oder auf die praktische Tätigkeit von Situationen bezieht. Derjenige, der sich damit beschäftigt, Situationen zu konstruieren. Mitglied der situationistischen Internationale.
Situationismus: Sinnloses Wort, missbräuchlich durch Ableitung des vorigen gebildet. Einen Situationismus gibt es nicht — was eine Doktrin zur Interpretation der vorhandenen Tatsachen bedeuten würde. Selbstverständlich haben sich die Anti-Situationisten den Begriff „Situationismus“ ausgedacht.

Ken Knabb: Geboren 1945 in Louisiana. Autor, Übersetzer und radikaler Theoretiker, Betreiber des Website *Bureau of Public Secrets.*

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